



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Northwest Region
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Seattle, WA 98115

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON MAKAH TRIBE GRAY WHALE HUNT

May 25, 1999

Due to the large volume of inquiries, NMFS prepared this brief report to provide factual information on the gray whale subsistence hunt conducted by the Makah Tribe during the spring northward migration of gray whales off Washington state. This brief report does not replace the formal cooperative report that will be prepared in conjunction with the Makah Tribe in accordance with Agreement between NOAA and the Makah Tribe.

The Makah Tribal Council issued a 10-day whaling permit to Wayne Johnson, whaling captain, on May 10, 1999, based on the recommendation of the Makah Whaling Commission in accordance with the Makah Tribe's "Management Plan for Makah Treaty Gray Whale Hunting for the years 1998-2002" (Makah Management Plan). This permit was issued during the timeframe when migrating gray whales are present in waters off Washington and the intent of the hunt was to target migrating gray whales.

On May 10, the date of issuance of the permit, tribal whaling was conducted in the ocean area south of Cape Flattery. The hunt was monitored by a NMFS observer and a tribal observer in a NMFS vessel that accompanied the tribal whaling vessels. The NMFS observer reported that the whaling crew approached several gray whales during the day and that one harpoon attempt missed. The observer did not observe any calf sized whales in the area, although the whaling crew reported that the canoe ceased pursuit on a large whale when a smaller whale was observed near it. (Note: the Makah Management Plan as well as U.S. regulations prohibit hunting on mother-calf pairs) Two protest vessels were active in the immediate area of the whalers, and the two occupants of one vessel were cited by the Coast Guard for grossly negligent operations and arrested by the County Sheriff for reckless endangerment and possible assault charges for allegedly discharging/throwing flares/fire extinguisher at the whaling crew. Most of the whaling activity occurred south of the Coast Guard's Regulated Navigation Area, so the 500 yard exclusionary zone was not in effect when the incidents with the protestors occurred.

On May 11, the tribal whaling crew was out again in the ocean area. The NMFS vessel with observers again accompanied the whaling vessels. No whales were approached. Due to inclement weather and no sightings of gray whales in the immediate area, the hunt ended after a short period of searching.



On May 15, the whaling crew began the 3rd day of whaling activity. The NMFS vessel with observers again accompanied the whaling vessels. A number of whales were approached during the day. Two harpoon attempts were made. On one of the harpoon attempts, the harpoon appeared to come into contact with the whale (underwater), but it also appeared that action by the tail pulled down the harpoon pole, line and float. The float came back to the surface immediately and the harpoon was not attached to the whale. The harpoon was examined and it was determined that the harpoon had not embedded in the whale nor caused serious injury; therefore, it was not considered to be a "strike" in accordance with the definition in the Makah Management Plan. No mother-calf pairs were observed in the area; although one solitary small gray whale (possibly less than 20-25 feet long) was observed. Protest vessels were active around the whalers through much of the day. Two protest vessels were observed to come in contact with whales; one vessel ran over the top of a whale and temporarily stunned the whale while another vessel hit the flukes of a diving whale beside the canoe. The Coast Guard cited four vessel operators for grossly negligent operations and/or MMPA infractions and three of the vessels were taken into federal custody. Similar to the first day, most of the whaling activity occurred south of the Coast Guard's Regulated Navigation Area, so the 500 yard exclusionary zone was not in effect when most of the incidents with protestors occurred.

On May 17, the whaling crew began the 4th day of whaling activity. The NMFS vessel with observers again accompanied the whaling vessels. At 6:55am, a gray whale was struck with the harpoon which remained affixed to the whale pulling the harpoon line and floats into the water. The whaling crew in the canoe held onto the harpoon line and the chaser boat approached the whale to dispatch it with a .577 caliber gun. The whale was shot twice in the head area with the last shot leaving the whale motionless underwater at 7:03am. The whale was then secured and towed to shore. No protest vessels were present when the whale was taken. The whale was brought onto the beach in Neah Bay in the evening and butchering began shortly after tribal ceremonies. NMFS biologists were allowed access to collect data from the whale while Makah tribal members removed meat and blubber. Most of the meat was removed by midnight when NMFS biologists had access to internal organs for collection of samples.

The whale taken by the Makah Tribe was a non-lactating female that measured 30' 5" (9.27 meters) total length. The whale could not be weighed, but was estimated to be about 7 metric tons (based on scientific literature on gray whales taken in Russia). Age could not be determined, but based on the length of the whale it was likely about 2½-3½ years-old (based on scientific literature on gray whales taken in Russia). Total time from the initial harpoon strike to the last shot which dispatched the whale was 8 minutes. The skull of the whale was examined and a 3.0" by 1.5" hole into the braincase was found where the last shot struck indicating the .577 caliber gun was effective in immediately dispatching the whale. (It should be noted that use of a large caliber gun and a motorized chaser boat were not a part of traditional Makah whaling, but they were used because the Tribe was required by NOAA to ensure that whales are taken in a humane and efficient manner through appropriate modification of traditional hunting methods)